

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 IO-13 DHA-02 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01
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AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, PINS, IS
SUBJECT: IKRIT AND BIRAM PROBLEM SURFACES AGAIN

1. THE PERENNIAL ISSUE OF IKRIT AND BIRAM HAS AGAIN SURFACED IN RECENT WEEKS. THE PROBLEM CONCERNS THE 29-YEARS EFFORTS OF THE FORMER INHABITANTS OF THESE TWO CHRISTIAN ARAB VILLAGES TO RETURN TO THEIR HOMES, HAVING BEEN EVACUATED IN THE HEAT OF BATTLE DURING THE 1948 WAR. AT THE TIME, THEY RECEIVED AN EXPRESS PROMISE BY THE IDF THAT THEY WOULD BE RETURNED WHEN THE FIGHTING SUBSIDED. CITING SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS AND THE PROBLEM OF PRECEDENT, THE PROMISE HAS TO DATE NOT BEEN HONORED. OVER THE YEARS THEIR CAUSE HAS REPEATEDLY BEEN RAISED IN VARIOUS FORA AND, DESPITE A SUPREME COURT DECISION IN THEIR FAVOR, THE GOVERNMENT, WITH THE BACKING OF MILITARY OPINION, HAS REFUSED TO SANCTION THEIR RETURN.

2. WITH THE CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT, AND PARTICULARLY SINCE BEGIN'S HERUT PARTY HAS LONG BEEN ON RECORD
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AS FAVORING THEIR RETURN, IT WAS INEVITABLE THAT EFFORTS ON THEIR BEHALF WOULD BE RENEWED. HERUT (AND LATER GAHAL) DREW A DISTINCTION BETWEEN BIRAM (MARONITE CHRISTIAN) WHICH, IT WAS CLAIMED HAD ASSISTED ISRAEL IN THE 1948 WAR, AND IKRIT (GREEK ORTHODOX) WHICH HERUT SAID HAD NOT. HOWEVER IN A RECENT T.V. INTERVIEW DEFENSE MINISTER EZER WEIZMAN LUMPED THE

TWO TOGETHER IN ADVOCATING THEIR RETURN. MORE IMPETUS CAME THIS MONTH WHEN MINISTER OF RELIGION AHAON ABU-HATZEIRA PUBLICLY ANNOUNCED HIS SUPPORT FOR THE VILLAGERS' CAUSE. THE PRESS IMMEDIATELY BEGAN TO REMIND THE PUBLIC OF THE FACTS OF THE CASE, WITH MOST EDITORIALS FAVORING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUPREME COURT DECISION. FOLLOWING APPROVAL BY ITS COUNCIL, THE DMC INTRODUCED IN THE KNESSET A MOTION OF SUPPORT FOR THE VILLAGERS WHICH WAS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE. THE GOVERNMENT PROMISED EARLY CONSIDERATION OF THE MATTER BY THE CABINET. TODAY, FORMATION OF A GOVERNMENT COMMISSION TO STUDY THE QUESTION HAS BEEN ANNOUNCED.

3. MANY OF THE VILLAGERS HAVE LONG SINCE ACCEPTED LIBERAL COMPENSATION AND OFFERS OF SUBSTITUTE HOMES SOME DISTANCE FROM THE LEBANESE BORDER. MOREOVER, THE VILLAGERS ADMIT THAT MOST OF THE FIELDS THAT THEY WORKED BEFORE 1948 WERE OVER THE BORDER IN LEBANON. THEY ARE ONLY ASKING FOR THE RIGHT TO RETURN TO THEIR FORMER HOMES.

4. OPPOSITION, HOWEVER, TO THE RETURN OF THE VILLAGERS CONTINUES TO BE STRONG. WITH THE SUCCESS OF THE GOOD FENCE, THE SECURITY ARGUMENT HAS LOST ITS FORCE AND ISRAELIS RECOGNIZE THE ANOMALY OF CULTIVATING CONTACTS WITH THEIR LEBANESE CHRISTIAN NEIGHBORS WHILE DENYING LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THEIR OWN CHRISTIANS THE RIGHT TO RETURN TO THEIR PROPERTY. THE NEGATIVE ARGUMENT STRESSED NOW IS THE ONE OF ESTABLISHING A PRECEDENT. OPPONENTS MAINTAIN THAT RETURNING THESE VILLAGERS WILL THEN GENERATE DEMANDS BY OTHER ISRAELI ARABS TO RETURN TO THEIR EXPROPRIATED PROPERTY. IT IS A ARGUMENT PRESSED HARD BY THE KIBBUTZ MOVEMENTS AND ESPECIALLY BY THE RESIDENTS OF THE JEWISH SETTLEMENTS NEIGHBORING IKRIT AND BIRMA, SOME OF WHOM NOW CULTIVATE THE ABANDONED FIELDS OF THE VILLAGERS. THIS IN TURN FOCUSES ON THE LARGER ISSUE OF THE RETURN OF THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEES VS. COMPENSATION AND RESETTLEMENT, WITH ALL THE POLITICAL AND EMOTIONAL OVERTONES THIS HAS FOR ISRAELIS.

5. THE PROBLEM IS PARTICULARLY VEXING TO THE LABOR PARTY. IT WAS THE LABOR GOVERNMENT THAT REPEATEDLY REFUSED TO ALLOW THE RETURN OF THE VILLAGERS, DESPITE THE CONTRARY POSITION OF THE HARD-LINE OPPOSITION PARTY, THE LIKUD AND ITS FOREBEARS, WHICH USED THE ISSUE TO EMBARRASS A PARTY (LABOR) OSTENSIBLY MORE SENSITIVE TO ARAB RIGHTS IN ISRAEL. WITH NEW CONSIDERATION BEING GIVEN TO THE PROBLEM, PRESSURE HAS

BUILT UP AGAIN WITHIN THE LABOR PARTY (MAPAM HAS LONG FAVORED RETURNING THE VILLAGERS) TO CHANGE ITS POSITION. THIS INCLUDED AN OPEN LETTER BY THE FORMER DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE FOREIGNMINISTRY, SHLOMO AVINERI TO GOLD MEIR URGING A REVERSAL OF HER ADAMACY AGAINST RETURNING THE VILLAGERS. THE MATTER CAME TO A HEAD LAST NIGHT IN A HEATED DEBATE AT A MEETING OF LABOR'S CENTRAL COMMITTEE, WITH GOLDA OPPOSING ANY CHANGE N THE PARTY'S POSITION. BY A VOTE OF 142 TO 58, THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE DECIDED TO CONTINUE ITS OPPOSITION TO A RETURN OF THE VILLAGERS.

6. THE ISSUE WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT, HOWEVER, REMAINS IN DOUBT. THE LIKUD ITSELF IS NOW SPLIT, WITH THE SMALL LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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LA'A FACTION OPPOSING RETURN AND DEMANDING THAT LIKUD MK'S BE ABLE TO VOTE THEIR CONSCIENCES WHEN THE ISSUE COMES BEFORE THE KNESSET.
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